

Sounding natural: improving oral presentation skills

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how multimodal resources can be used to teach oral communication strategies, as exemplified in a course taught at the University of Padua, Italy. The course focused on lexicon and language structures in use, pronunciation and intonation, body language, and cultural awareness. A variety of multimedia resources were used, including: pictures and illustrations; digital slides; audio files for pronunciation exercises and for audio-video feedback with the speech analysis software *Praat*; video clips from online English courses and other YouTube videos of authentic interviews, talk shows, news, monologues, and presentations. The main class activities were: listening and watching video clips; metalinguistic discussions on the use of verbal and non-verbal language in different linguistic situations; pronunciation practice; and speaking. Students were filmed while speaking and received feedback on their oral and communicative skills. Overall, the course appeared to be highly effective in raising students' awareness of facts about English communication and its workings.

Keywords: *oral communication, student awareness, multimedia, intonation, non-verbal language, feedback*

I. INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in oral communication is increasingly required both in academic and professional settings. For this reason, an increasing number of courses, taught in both public and private institutions, are addressing oral communication skills. With globalization, the number of opportunities for interactions in English has increased and so has the need to learn strategies for successful oral communication in English. In the field of ELT, research is being carried out with the aim of testing and comparing approaches and methods for enhancing the learning and acquisition of successful communication skills in the classroom. In this perspective, this paper illustrates the experience carried out in a class of intermediate speakers of English (B1-B2 level) at the University of Padua, Italy. The paper discusses how various multimodal resources were used to teach communication strategies in the course and how they contributed to meaning-making. On the one hand, they were used to present real-life situations, reconstruct context, and aid the comprehension of texts, and on the other hand they

contributed to stimulating students' interest and participation in the classroom by providing fun and enjoyable material for the learners to work with. Finally, the paper discusses how in both cases these resources contributed to enhancing language learning.

II. ORAL COMMUNICATION

Oral communication is an essential aspect of social interaction. Being able to communicate well is not only an important skill in itself, but also contributes significantly to the success of a person's personal and professional life. Speaking is used to engage in conversations, transmit information, express opinions, and contribute to discussions. Speaking also has an enormous impact on the impression we make on people, because when we speak we communicate both personal information about ourselves (such as age, origin, social status, education) and paralinguistic information about what we are saying (intentions, attitudes, emotions) (Ladefoged 1967: 104). But speaking is not the only element involved in communication. Listening is also involved, as understanding is as essential to communication as speaking. Communication cannot take place if the receiver does not understand the speaker's message. In addition, other modalities such as intonation, facial expressions, hand gestures and body movements combine to convey meaning along with the verbal message, and naturally influence both the speaker and the receiver. In fact, communication is multimodal, that is, it combines and integrates the meaning-making resources of various semiotic modalities to create meaning (Baldry and Thibault 2006a, 2006b, Bateman 2008, O'Halloran 2011 in press, Ventola et al. 2004). Finally, successful communication does not only involve being competent in language structures, lexicon, and phonology, but also implies a knowledge of the socio-linguistic norms and conventions of the community where the language is spoken (Halliday 1978, 1994, Halliday and Hasan 1991, Hymes 1974). This knowledge is at the basis of speakers' language usage, and conditions speakers' behavior in all communicative situations. Thanks to this knowledge, speakers know how to greet, express gratitude, apologize, when to talk and when it is best to remain silent, and when it is appropriate to use formal or informal language, for example (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b, Kress 1988, Martin and Rose 2003, Widdowson 1978).

In ELT instruction, both speaking and listening are targeted as abilities that learners

need to acquire. However, learners' input is often limited to a restricted range of examples of oral language, the main linguistic reference for spoken language being the teacher herself, frequently aided by audio (or video) material presenting short conversations from some pseudo-real situation purposely created for learners in a rather artificial way. Typically, learners are asked to focus their attention on linguistic elements (such as words or sentence structures) which become the main source of information about language use, constructions or pronunciation. Generally, learners manage to master basic listening and speaking skills, with some students being far more effective in their oral communication than others, possibly because of a natural predisposition to communication (Allen et al. 2007).

This traditional approach to learning oral communication skills presents several shortcomings. First of all, it may suggest to learners that the information that is essential to communication in the target language be conveyed only by means of what is spoken and not in what accompanies speech (Ackerley and Coccetta forthcoming). Secondly, by focusing students' attention on one modality (speech), this approach limits learners' ability to produce and cope with the real language to be used in real-life situations. As mentioned above, non-verbal elements such as intonation, gaze, facial expressions, body movements and posture play an absolutely crucial role in the creation of a text's meaning (see also Mehrabian 1972) and cannot be neglected if the aim of instruction is to achieve successful communication (Kellerman 1992, Kelly 1999, Mueller 1980, Sueyoshi and Hardison 2005, von Raffler-Engel 1980).

Finally, instruction that does not provide students with some awareness of language-specific socio-cultural conventions may lead learners to adopt inappropriate cultural-linguistic models, and thus contribute to the speaker's failure to communicate. For example, it is argued that the inability of second language speakers to use the grammatical structures of the second language in accordance with the pragmatic and discourse norms of the L2 may lead to intercultural misunderstandings, often interpreted as instances of impoliteness (Barron 2003).

Yet, the skills that can make the difference between minimal and effective communication can be taught, practiced, and improved. In particular, as this paper will discuss, the shortcomings of an ELT approach that focuses on distinct abilities can be

overcome with an approach to language instruction which is multimodal, that is, an approach that views communication as the result of the integration of multiple expressive resources.

III. A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO TEACHING ORAL COMMUNICATION

As seen above, one of the problems encountered in traditional ELT is that students are presented with a restricted variety of oral texts, which are often void of reference to a real context. Texts which make little reference to a context of situation may be extremely hard for learners to comprehend, because it puts them in the condition of having to rely solely on their linguistic knowledge – which may not be advanced enough – to understand a message. Instead, providing students with the context of situation in which communication takes place means providing them with information about the meanings being exchanged, thereby adding important clues to help understand language. The interplay of different semiotic resources may help disambiguate possible unclear expressions by adding redundancy to the text. In either case, the presence of multiple modalities can help the learner get to the essence of the message.

Today, thanks to advances in technology, teaching oral communication can benefit greatly from the availability of a variety of forms of support. Multimedia texts are now easy to find in the form of video and audio files on the Internet. Inexpensive, easily accessible and user-friendly technology can provide stimulating material, suitable to present authentic and varied communicative situations, for use in the classroom or at home. Though the use of multimedia and online technologies does not automatically mean enhanced materials and enhanced learning (Hewson and Hughes 2001: 78; Kaltenbacher 2004: 119-120), careful course design and a controlled use of multimedia resources can ensure that meaning is acquired multimodally, with a positive effect on language acquisition (Ackerley and Coccetta forthcoming). In addition, the use of authentic material can enhance students' interest in classroom activities and increase their motivation to listen, understand, and learn. "Listening to real people speaking about real-life experiences and interacting with other speakers in a natural way may be considered more stimulating than listening to actors reading scripts elaborated by EFL writers" (Ackerley and Coccetta 2007).

One of the great advantages of introducing support forms in ELT is that it allows teachers to provide a context for discourse participants, by combining and integrating various modes of communication. This helps teachers situate linguistic events in their socio-cultural settings, reduce the distance from unfamiliar situations, and make their comprehension easier for learners (Donato and McCormick 1994). Language learning can also be enhanced through the use of visual cues – which may help students organize relevant information in stored memory and aid the comprehension process (Mueller 1980) – as well as body gestures and facial expressions (Sueyoshi and Hardison 2005), which seem to help contextualize language and facilitate the understanding of the role relations between speakers, thus stimulating learners to make a greater effort to comprehend. As has been claimed (Ackerley and Coccetta forthcoming, Kellerman 1992), raising learners' awareness of the multimodal nature of communication is a way to increase the strategies they have available for comprehending and dealing with texts in the L2.

IV. THE PRESENT STUDY

This paper reports on the experience of teaching English communication skills in a class of intermediate speakers of English (B1-B2 level) at the University of Padua, Italy. The course was offered to prepare students to use language in real-life situations, in academic, social or professional contexts. The course aimed to increase the students' overall communicative competence by raising their awareness of the many levels at which communication works, based on the idea that social and linguistic meaning is constructed through the interplay of different semiotic resources. Participation in the course was limited to 20 students, and classes were taught in a multimedia lab over a period of 12 weeks.

IV.1. Syllabus and material

The course syllabus covered the following areas:

- Lexicon and grammatical structures, as they are frequently used in a variety of

different communicative situations (for example: ‘introducing yourself’, ‘small talk’, ‘what do you do for fun?’);

- Text types and structures used in various kinds of discourse (e.g.: telling stories in casual conversation, telling jokes while delivering a speech);
- English pronunciation, with an emphasis on stress, intonation, discourse pauses, and explanations;
- Basic notions of body language, with an emphasis on the meaning of particular hand gestures (contrasting Italian and English), gaze and posture;
- ‘Cultural awareness’, that is, an analysis of the language used in various types of discourse and reflecting the speakers’ sensitivity with regard to particular subjects (e.g., political correctness and/or taboo words; topics/questions to be avoided in conversational English); furthermore, the study of differences in the content and style of delivery of particular discourse types (e.g., when it is considered appropriate to use humor/to be quiet in formal situations).

Throughout the course, emphasis was placed on contrasts existing between the Italian and British/American language and linguistic behavior (for obvious reasons, since the course was taught in Italy), due the general interest of the students in these varieties of English and the availability of online material.

The material for the course was partly created by the teacher (digital slides, pronunciation samples and practice with Praat (www.praat.org) – see below), and partly retrieved online. All the video (and audio) clips were found online. YouTube was the main source for the retrieval and use of authentic real-life speech and video material that provided most of the information on language and linguistic behavior for the learners. Videos from YouTube were used to introduce the lesson topics (e.g. what is ‘small talk’ and how is it used?), create listening exercises, show the dynamics of communication, and exemplify the language occurring in all the different types of linguistic situations examined in class (interviews, talk shows, news, monologues, presentations). Some of the videos were part of web-based English courses and exercises (see below). These were used because, by showing a good degree of authenticity as compared to material that is generally available on other supports, these online courses appeared to be compatible with the approach adopted in this course.

IV.2. Methods and tools

In order to teach and stimulate the learning of oral communication, a variety of methodologies and tools were used, as described below.

IV.2.1. Unit introduction

The teacher introduced the main topic of the unit in the traditional fashion, i.e., with digital slides. The aim of this was to draw attention to the lesson topic, as well as to satisfy the students that require a formal approach to learning. After this formal introduction, the students were shown a video, where the same topic was presented by a native speaker. For this purpose, advantage was often taken of the availability of videos in online English courses. These videos often present a controlled linguistic situation, with a transcription of what the speaker(s) say(s), and thus provide a type of listening activity that is easier than authentic speech, in which many contextual factors may make listening comprehension more difficult (see IV.2.2. below). Some of the courses that were used, and that became popular among the students, are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Web-based courses used in class.

Learning English with Mr. Duncan	general topics such as: introducing yourself, 'small talk', talking about the weather http://www.youtube.com/user/duncaninchina
Real English	use of formulas used in real conversations http://real-english.com/
English Meeting	pronunciation of single sounds and of formulas, such as those used in greetings http://www.youtube.com/user/EnglishMeeting
Public Speaking Tips: Delivering a Great Speech	guidelines and advice on how to speak in public http://www.ehow.com/video_4959559_public-speaking-tips-delivering-great.html

The purpose of watching a person on a video presenting the same topic that had been introduced formally by the teacher had the effect of adding a dimension of 'reality' to what the teacher had said and of presenting a different perspective on the topic in focus. The videos were also used to introduce explanations on linguistic structures, idioms, ways to say words, and convey meaning.

In addition to videos, at this stage in the lesson, pictures and other graphic materials were used to introduce students to the basics of body language and to illustrate the meaning of particular postures, and of hand, eye, head movements, as well as to stimulate discussions on cultural differences in body language during interactions and presentations (see Figure 3).

IV.2.2. Watching, listening and reflecting

After the lesson topic had been introduced, videos were used to show students examples of real-life communication in English, as well as to start up metalinguistic discussions on the speakers' use of language (e.g., level of formality, expressions used, use of humor, use of emphatic stress and intonation, use of body language). Where applicable, attention was drawn to the differences between each speaker's communication strategies as compared to the expected Italian communication strategies in similar contexts, as well as to the differences in discourse practices. For example, there are relevant differences between Italian and English at the level of linguistic and discourse formality in many interactions. Thus, it is customary for a person giving a talk or a lecture in front of a British/American audience to add a joke here and there to get the audience to laugh. This behavior would be considered inappropriate or at least unusual in Italy in a similar situation, yet it is a behavior that should be learned as it is part of English discourse conventions.

In this part of the lesson, the videos, featuring native speakers speaking to other fellow native speakers, presented greater comprehension problems for students than the videos which are part of English courses used in the first part of the lesson (see IV.1.1. above). For this reason, this session was preceded or followed by listening-comprehension activities, often based on the video transcriptions (prepared by the teacher beforehand), such as the introduction and explanation of key words, questions on the text, and fill in the blanks. The students then watched the videos, and worked on the listening comprehension exercises. The whole class was involved and the students were engaged in questions and answers about the content of the videos.

IV.2.3. Acting out

In the final part of each class, after watching, comprehending and discussing the videos, the students had to prepare a short oral text with the same characteristics as the one watched in class. This involved using the same type of language and discourse strategies as those used in the model video. In the case of interactions (interviews, conversations and the like), the students had to work in pairs or groups. They then had to act out their speech, in front of the class, while being filmed by the class technician. In each case, the participants received oral or written feedback from the teacher.

Being filmed while speaking, English was a very important part of the course. The students received copies of their video-recordings at the beginning and at the end of the course. As part of their home assignments, the students prepared a YouTube video, enacting a real-life situation similar to those analyzed in class. Lastly, as a final assignment, they gave a formal presentation in front of the class to show their awareness of all the English language structures, intonation patterns, body language and communication strategies studied in class. For this presentation the students were also filmed and received written comments from the teacher, while the rest of the class would make comments on each individual's presentation style.

The course emphasis on filming students while speaking and giving them feedback on presentation styles was aimed at maximizing the students' awareness about the multimodal nature of communication, based on the belief that raising students' awareness enhances L2 learning (Ackerley and Coccetta forthcoming, Kellerman 1992, Kelly 1999, Mueller 1980, Sueyoshi and Hardison 2005).

V. THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

V.1. Prosody and intonation

Having an L2-appropriate prosody and intonation is important for successful communication, because non-native use of speech pauses, volume, pitch and intonation have important pragmatic effects on how the speaker's message is received by the listener. A great deal of emphasis was placed on pronunciation, and particularly sentence

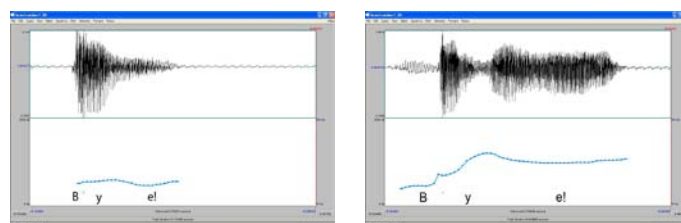
and discourse intonation, in the course.

Italian and English present major differences in their phonological and phonetic systems. It has been shown (e.g., Busà 1995, Flege et al. 2003, Piske et al. 2002) that vowel production, a well-known pronunciation problem for Italian learners of English, both correlates with the Italian speakers' perceived degree of accent in English and affects their intelligibility and successful communication in English. But vowel production is only part of a wider issue involving the way in which Italian speakers of English produce English rhythm and prosodic patterns, which have been shown to have a major effect on speakers' intelligibility and successful communication (e.g., Kormos and Dénes 2004, Munro 2008, Munro and Derwing 2001, Pickering 2002, 2004, Wennerstrom 2000). In fact, pilot studies (Busà 2007, 2010) suggest that Italian intonation in English may be characterized by an overall flat contour, with no clear sentence stress or pitch peak, and with intonation patterns that are unvaried across different sentence types. This is unlike native intonation, which is characterized by the presence of strong sentence stress and pitch peaks, and by different intonation contours for different sentence types.

The different intonation contours by Italian speakers of English, resulting from processes of interference and transfer of phonological rules from Italian into English, may lead to communication problems. Because Italian intonation in English does not cue the listener to salient information, given vs. new information, emphasis, and contrast through stress and pitch, it does not reflect an English-appropriate discourse information structure. Moreover, because a level intonation is used in English to signal detachment, lack of interest or participation, the use of inappropriate intonation contours may also have paralinguistic effects, by contributing to the creation of a distorted image of the speakers' levels of engagement in the proposition (Busà 2007, 2010).

The idea that intonation and prosody carry important meaning in communication led the teacher to draw continuous attention to speech sentence stress and intonation patterns. To raise the students' awareness of the differences in their English intonation patterns as compared to native speakers' intonation, Praat (www.praat.org) was used. Praat, a freeware tool which is widely employed to carry out acoustic analysis, was used to allow students to visualize their own sentence pitch patterns and compare them with

native speakers' pitch patterns, following a method reviewed by Chun (1998) and shown in Figures 1-2 below. Practice with this tool was encouraged at home as a means to improve overall intonation and expressiveness in English.



Figures 1 and 2. Exemplification of the use of the software for speech analysis Praat as a tool to aid pronunciation. Figure 1 (left) shows the sound wave and pitch pattern, as visualized with Praat, of the utterance 'Bye!' spoken by an Italian speaker *before* audiovisual feedback with a native speaker's model. Figure 2 (right) shows another utterance produced by the same Italian native speaker *after* audiovisual feedback with a native speaker's model, revealing great improvements in both the duration and pitch contour.

V.2. Body language

In the process of communication, the human body contributes significantly to conveying important information about the speaker, his/her feelings and attitudes. When speaking a second language, it is important to be aware of what the body communicates when particular postures, gestures or facial expressions are used, as they may convey unintentional meaning and thus affect the outcome of L2 communication. In general, speakers may move too much or too little while speaking and this may affect the message they want to convey.

Italians are well known for using their hands a lot when they speak. Some of the gestures commonly used by Italians are so dense in meaning that Italians assume they are also understood by other language speakers, though they may be meaningless to a non-Italian. Other gestures may carry a completely different meaning in a different language and the Italian needs to be made aware of that.

The students gained awareness of the meaning conveyed by major body postures and hand movements, as well as the importance of gaze in communication. Figures and pictures were used to aid the description of the gestures presented in class. Pictures of

well-known figures from the world of politics were also used to exemplify how body language is associated, sometimes unconsciously, with a person's position or personality (Figure 3). The notions taught to the students were then discussed in all the videos watched in the course, and the students were encouraged to try to monitor their own gestures and gaze, and to use them appropriately as a means of emphasizing, and directing attention to the important parts of their speeches.



Figure 3. Examples of pictures used to illustrate body language.

VI. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TEACHING METHOD AND CONCLUSIONS

The course appeared to be highly effective in raising students' awareness of facts about English communication and its workings. The students showed a definite improvement in their ability to structure different types of discourse (e.g., greetings, interviews, presentations) and to use common expressions and formulas that were suitable for different situations. They also showed an awareness of the meaning of body language, which surfaced as a visible and persistent attempt at controlling their Italian-style hand movements, and to use English-like gestures instead, which became particularly evident when they used a non-Italian way of counting from one to three (i.e., with palms facing the audience, rather than the speaker). As regards prosody, students did appear to try to use English-like intonation patterns, though the duration of the course (12 weeks) was

not enough to bring about a real change.

Overall, the experience with this course shows that it can be a useful (and indeed extremely effective) way to raise students' awareness of English communication skills, and that an integrated multimodal communicative approach works well for teaching oral communication. To communicate successfully, the speaker needs to be aware that there are several elements of oral communication which can and should be used. Traditional instruction in (first and) second language focuses on linguistic levels and verbal skills, the result being that students may not be able to deal effectively with real-life communication. Restricting instruction to simple spoken texts is limiting and does not reflect real-life situations. Instead, skills such as eye contact, body language, style, understanding the audience, adapting to the audience, active and reflexive listening, using formulas, conventions and discourse strategies as is appropriate in different linguistic situations and social interactions are as important to communication as language itself and should be integrated in classes focusing on spoken language. In fact, the complexity involved in oral communication requires a teaching method that includes all the elements that contribute to the meaning of the message.

Oral communication fulfills a number of general and discipline-specific pedagogical functions, and successful communication skills are in demand both in the private and the professional sphere. While becoming an outstanding speaker requires years of practice, students can improve their communication skills during a course if oral communication is a regular feature in ELT enhanced by the use of multimodality/multimodal resources.

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